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There are two or three histories of science departments in Canadian universities in the literature and this little book adds another and on a rather unlikely candidate: the physics department of the Ontario Agricultural College, the precursor of the modern University of Guelph. Physics in an agricultural college? Apart from teaching elementary physics, what would a self-respecting physicist do in such an institution? The answers are surprising, fascinating but do not constitute the normal fare in a history of physics. Conditioned as we are to expect late 19th and early 20th century physicists to be involved in 'real' physics (i.e., quantum theory, nuclear physics, solid state physics, etc.), we easily overlook the fact that an eminently practical institution would want eminently practical scientists and that the majority of science practiced is, in fact, applied science.

Jim Hunt's pleasant little work is clearly a labour of love. It is unselfconsciously antiquarian in nature, but no mind, such works should not be dismissed. Maybe because I was much taken, as a child, with Sergeant Friday's attitude ('Just the facts, m'am'), I quite enjoy reading a straightforward story told well.

Because the physics staff at OAC was never large until relatively recent times, the story can be organized by the primary professors of the day. But what did these professors do? They did not build cyclotrons; they investigated what the Ontario farmer needed investigating: drainage of soils, ploughing, ventilation of storage buildings , cold storage, shipping of produce without spoilage and lightning rods. Hunt notes that in the first days of the college, probably none of the students or faculty had heard of Clerk-Maxwell. It was the case, a half-century later, that one could investigate agricultural electricity -- if one may invent a new form of science -- without reference to Clerk-Maxwell!

In my own researches into the teaching of science at Canadian universities, one obvious distinction I have noted was how science was taught at larger, research-oriented universities and at the small, church-affiliated colleges. Clearly, science was taught in these two kinds of institutions for quite different purposes. But Jim Hunt's little book reminds us that there is another option, practical science for practitioners. This suggests that a closer look at the western Canadian universities, where engineering and agricultural science was central, would be well worth our while.

Amongst the anecdotes in the book, Hunt recalls that John McCrae, the poet, taught at the OAC (and was, by all accounts, a wretched teacher) and a later student was John Kenneth Galbraith. One wonders what might have happened if both had been influenced by the physics professors and turned their energies to cold storage research!

The work includes appendices and illustrations. It is not available in bookshops, but can be ordered, for $5.00, from the Department of Physics at Guelph.

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